

Character Class

Stealthy Rascals

Rascally Weapons and Armor

By Skip Williams



Several installments ago, this column identified [four basic character roles](#): sturdy brawler, stealthy rascal, arcane spellslinger, and divine guardian. We've already examined the [sturdy brawler](#) in detail. Now we turn our attention to the stealthy rascal.

These characters depend on their wits and their skills to meet the challenges of adventuring. They can take the fight to the enemy fairly well, but they usually do better if they take a more subtle approach. Stealthy rascals can do well serving as a party's eyes and ears, probing the way ahead for hidden dangers or worthy opportunities. Depending on their skills and class features, they might also serve as a party's face and voice, negotiating or bluffing their way through encounters, tracking elusive foes, or breaking into closed areas.

When last we met, we considered [races for stealthy characters](#). Once you've chosen a race to go along with your stealthy class, it's time to think about your gear, starting with your weapons and armor.

Weaponry

While it's best to choose martial or exotic weapons to make the most of your combat potential, your stealthy class probably doesn't make too many weapons available. You're likely to be limited to simple weapons and a handful of others. For example, the rogue class gives you access to all simple weapons plus the hand crossbow, rapier, shortbow, and short sword. Some stealthy classes have even smaller weapon selections.

When choosing your weapons, you needn't try to buy every weapon your class makes available to you. All you need is a primary melee weapon, which you'll use in most battles, a ranged weapon for reaching foes you can't otherwise attack, and one or two backup weapons. Carrying more than that just weighs you down. As a stealthy rascal, you want to keep your load light.

Fighting Styles

If you fight well enough, consider the same combat styles more martial characters use -- one-handed weapon and shield (or without a shield), two-handed weapon, and two weapons. Character Class considered the [merits of various fighting styles](#) in our series on fighting characters.

Most rascals fight with a single weapon in one hand. If your class offers any special combat abilities, however, such as the ranger's fighting style, you might decide to fight with a weapon in each hand. Effective fighting with two weapons requires a big investment in feats (and in weapons, once you start considering magical weapons), so it usually doesn't pay unless your class gives you some bonus feats.

Many stealthy classes don't give you shield proficiency, so you might want to consider a two-handed weapon, especially if you have a Strength bonus of +2 or more. (When you use a fairly big weapon in two hands, you gain 1.5 x your Strength bonus to damage -- see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*.) Wielding a big, heavy weapon can clash with most people's idea of what a stealthy rascal should be, but sometimes it can be fun to play a character who defies common expectations.

Your Primary Melee Weapon

Unless you have feat slots to burn, stick to the list of weapons that your class makes available to you. Consider any martial weapons on the list first. Martial weapons tend to deal more damage or have better critical characteristics (or both) than simple weapons of the same size. Depending on your class, the simple weapons available to you might have slightly better damage potential. Even in such cases, a martial weapon might prove a



better choice in the long run because it's more compact or opens up new options for you. For example, a rogue can deal more damage with a heavy mace or morningstar (simple weapons) than with a short sword or rapier (martial weapons). Both of the latter two weapons, however, deal more critical hits than a mace or morningstar and both work with the Weapon Finesse feat, which can be a good choice for rascals with high Dexterity scores (as most do).

If you're fighting with a single weapon that you wield in one hand, consider the following martial melee weapons if they're available to you -- longsword, rapier, sap, scimitar, or short sword.

The longsword is arguably the best of the bunch because of its damage potential, but not all stealthy rascals are proficient with it. The rapier and the scimitar deal reasonable damage and have great critical threat ranges. As noted earlier, the rapier also works with the Weapon Finesse feat. The sap is a somewhat undistinguished weapon, but it deals nonlethal damage, which can prove handy when you want to capture foes rather than kill them. The short sword is the only light weapon on the list, but it still deals decent damage.

If you decide to use a two-handed weapon, your options aren't stellar, but consider a spear, longsword, or quarterstaff.

You can throw a spear, which gives you extra flexibility in combat. A longsword has reach, which is useful for keeping foes at a distance (albeit a short distance). A quarterstaff actually is a double weapon, but you can use just one end as a two-handed weapon. You usually can pass off a quarterstaff as a simple (if big) walking stick when guards cast a suspicious eye your way. All these weapons are long enough to serve as useful implements outside of combat. You can use them to probe the way ahead for hazards, poke at suspicious objects from a distance, and many other beneficial chores.

If you opt for fighting with two weapons, you have several options. You might choose one of the one-handed weapons we discussed previously plus a light weapon -- for example, a rapier and a shortsword. This option tends to give you the best damage potential. You can do very well with a light weapon in each hand, such as two shortswords. This helps you get the most out of the Weapon Focus feat. Using a quarterstaff (a double weapon) also allows you to take advantage of the Weapon Focus feat (the feat applies to both ends), and you have the option to use just one end of the staff as a two-handed weapon.

Backup Weaponry

Once you've chosen the melee weapon (or weapons) you'll use most often, consider a backup melee weapon or two (you should travel light, but don't skimp on the equipment you need). An extra weapon is vital if you lose your primary melee weapon -- such as when a foe disarms you. True, you can just stoop down and pick up a weapon you've dropped, but doing so when an enemy threatens you provokes an attack of opportunity. It's better to draw another weapon in that circumstance.

As this series has noted before, it's a good idea to choose a backup weapon that deals a different sort of damage from your primary weapon. For example, if you normally use a shortsword (a slashing weapon), then choose a light or heavy mace (bludgeoning) or a morningstar (bludgeoning and piercing) as a backup. This approach is helpful when you must deal with a foe that has damage reduction that your primary weapon can't overcome.

If you plan on keeping your backup weapons concealed, or if a heavy mace or morningstar doesn't fit your character concept, then stick to light weapons such as daggers, light maces, or sickles.

A weapon you can throw, such as a hand ax or dagger, is particularly useful when an opponent is just out of reach or when you don't want to get too close to an enemy. A light slashing weapon also is handy when some big monster swallows you whole or when you're grappling.

Ranged Weapon

For long-range combat, choose a martial ranged weapon if you can. A bow offers great range and damage. If you have a high base attack bonus, a bow allows you to make multiple attacks. Unless you have a Strength bonus,



however, don't bother spending extra cash on a composite bow.

If martial ranged weapons aren't available to you, it's hard to beat a crossbow. A heavy crossbow packs a good punch, but it's so slow to reload that it's nearly impossible to use when you're on the move. Most rascals will do better with light crossbows.

A sling can be a good alternative to a bow or crossbow, especially for halflings. A sling is cheap, lightweight, and pretty easy to conceal. You might even be able to convince your DM to allow you to improvise a sling from a strip of cloth or leather if the need arises.

Your Weapons Budget

Even if you plan to use unarmed strikes, be ready to spend a significant amount of your cash on weaponry. You'll need a decent ranged weapon to keep foes at a distance, and when in melee, a masterwork melee weapon will help you get hits. As a rule of thumb, plan to spend at least 15% of your cash on weapons. Even if you spend 30-40% of your wealth on a decent selection of weapons, you should still have enough cash left over to buy everything else you need.

Early in your career, it's not unreasonable to spend as much as two-thirds of your cash on weaponry.

To track how much you've spent on weapons, add up the costs of all your current equipment and add in your current cash. Do not count any non-portable assets you might have, such as buildings or land. Whenever you find that your total weaponry cost represents less than 15% of what you're carrying around (or could carry around), it's time to purchase a new weapon or upgrade a current one. For example, you could trade in a masterwork weapon for a magical version or pay someone to give the weapon an enhancement bonus. Likewise, if you're thinking about buying a new weapon or an upgrade for an old one, you should rethink the purchase if doing so will leave you with more than 30-40% of your assets invested in weapons.

Armor and Protective Gear

You can't always keep out of harm's way, so plan to buy a few things to boost your Armor Class. Most stealthy classes limit you to light, or sometimes to medium, armor and possibly a shield. (The monk class doesn't give you any armor or proficiency at all). It's hard to go wrong buying the best armor you can afford in the heaviest type of armor you're allowed. If you plan to use any stealth or movement skills, however, such as Hide, Move Silently, Jump, or Tumble (and what rascal doesn't have a few of those), then consider masterwork armor. The reduction in your Armor Check penalty is worth the money. For most rascals, masterwork studded leather is a good compromise between protection and agility.

Unless you're a monk or you plan to fight with both hands, add a shield. Even if your class doesn't provide shield proficiency, you can use a masterwork buckler without incurring any penalties.

As you advance in level and accumulate more wealth, add additional protective items, such as signs of protection and amulets of natural armor. Also consider an item that imposes a miss chance on your foes. You can manage that cheaply (if temporarily) with a potion (or scroll) of *blur* or *displacement*.

Your Armor Budget

If you're using a suit of armor as your chief piece of protective gear, plan to spend 20 to 30% of your wealth on protective devices. When playing a monk, you can still buy plenty of protective gear, such as *bracers of armor* and *rings of protection*, but you'll have to wait until you gain a few levels until you can afford a permanent item. In the meantime, invest in a few potions of *mage armor* to use during key battles.

To learn more about stealthy rascals, be sure to read our installment on [character roles](#) and [stealthy races](#).

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of

Dragon Magazine for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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